

Beyond Stories

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In our previous Family Involvement column (December 2007/January 2008), we pointed out the importance of and need for children to read at home. The Harry Potter series created a sensation that has inspired many youngsters to take up the reading habit at home and over the summer. However, we also pointed out that being wild about Harry is not enough. Children need to find other books that will lead to increased reading at home.

In this month's column we want to expand on the theme of learning to read and learning to love reading through reading. Stories, or narratives, are important and perhaps are the main entry point for reading at home. However, we think that learning to embrace reading means learning to embrace a wider palette of materials that count as texts for reading. Many of these other text forms are especially well suited for home use—they are easily accessible, can be read in short spurts, and can easily fit into the nature of life at home. As parents we need to be aware of these alternative text types. As teachers, we need to help parents see that these other types of materials are legitimate forms of reading. Let's take a look at the various forms of reading (and writing) that are available for children and their families.

Environmental Print

Words and text are all around us—on street signs, billboards, bumper stickers, and license plates while driving; in airports and airplanes while flying; on buses and subways; in stores; on food labels; in advertisements; and in restaurants. Pointing out and reading the words in children's natural surroundings are great ways to develop their early letter and word recognition skills. Later, we encourage parents to take words

embedded in a rich environmental context and write them on charts that can be displayed on the refrigerator or the child's own bulletin board. Then, whenever possible, parents can read through the words with children and talk about their meanings.

Lists

Perhaps the most common form of text that all of us write and use on a regular basis is a list. Adults make to-do lists, grocery lists, birthday wish lists, and many forms of the ubiquitous top-10 list. We also read lists as well—the list of ingredients in a favorite recipe, the list of top teams and players in major league baseball, the list of stocks that have performed well the previous day, and, of course, the list of best selling books that appears frequently in newspapers. Indeed, lists have become so ubiquitous that many books of lists have been published—our favorite is *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists* (Fry & Kress, 2006).

Help parents see that lists are a normal part of family life and an excellent way to share literacy with their children. Encourage parents to make lists with their children, from to-do to wish lists and everything in between. And, furthermore, encourage parents to read the lists to and with their children and to have their children read the created lists to them.

Rhymes and Poems

Short rhymes and poems are particularly well suited for home use. Short rhymes and poems don't require extended periods of time for parents to read to and with their children. The rhyme and alliteration in such verses make them ideal for developing sound or phonemic awareness in children. The rhythmical nature of poems

and rhymes makes them easy to learn to read and fun to read again and again, which is a main method for developing basic reading fluency in children.

Collections of rhymes and poems abound in libraries and bookstores. Recommend that parents read a favorite poem to and with their children every evening. The entire experience can take less than 10 minutes. Help parents and children look for the interesting words in these texts, jot them down on paper, and read them repeatedly with their children. Finally, the brevity and patterned nature of poems make them easy for children (often with the parents' help) to write their own versions of favorite poems that can be further shared with other families.

For example, the following poem, based on a familiar nursery rhyme, was rewritten, read, and reread by a youngster who wanted to write about the principal of his summer reading program.

Diddle diddle dumpling Principal Tim
He's not very fat and he's not very slim.
He's a pretty nice guy and we all like him.
Diddle diddle dumpling Principal Tim.

Songs

For many families, songs are a natural part of family life—whether it's singing holiday favorites, "Happy Birthday" to the birthday person, camp songs around the fire, or traveling songs in the car while on summer vacation. When songs are sung and the singers have a copy of the lyrics in front of them, they are reading—reading short, highly predictable texts that are meant to be read orally. Such texts, we feel, are among the very best materials for developing students' fluency and word recognition skills. Research is beginning to show that singing does provide a wonderful and effective vehicle for teaching reading (Biggs, Homan, Dedrick, & Rasinski, in press). We think that songs and singing should play an important part in the literacy experience for children in school and at home. There are several websites where parents and children can find the lyrics to classic old songs. One of our favorites is kids.niehs.nih.gov/music.htm.

Newspapers (and Magazines)

One of the more ubiquitous forms of reading comes to many homes on a daily basis—the newspaper. The va-

riety found in a newspaper provides any parent with a wealth of material for reading to and with their children. Current events at a national or local level can be followed through the main stories of the day. Critical reading and analysis can occur in the opinion and editorial section of the paper. The comics are a great introduction to graphic texts and novels for students. Brief biographies of the famous and not so famous are often found in the obituaries. The entertainment and sports sections often provide reviews of sporting events, movies, and other events in these areas of popular culture. And, of course, most papers have a section for word games that allow parents and children to examine how words work and what they mean in a playful and engaging manner. Many newspapers have sections devoted to children and what is happening in their worlds. For the cost of a cup of coffee, we think that newspapers can be an enormously helpful way for families to get together around literacy.

Mail

Families receive mail daily—from bills to advertisements to personal and business letters. Parents can easily transform the daily mail into opportunities to explore reading and writing with children. Going through the mail together, sorting the mail into appropriate piles, prioritizing what needs to be attended to first, and then reading through selected items can be a most productive 10–15 minutes for parents and children, and it takes very little additional time beyond what parents would normally spend on the mail.

Technology

We would be remiss not to mention the fastest growing form of material for reading at home—the computer, Internet, and the other forms of information technology that have become part of everyday life. Indeed, most of the texts we have mentioned earlier in this column can easily be accessed on the Internet. Not only is it easy to find materials for children to read from the Internet, but also the computer and Internet offer their own unique opportunities for parents and children to read and write together—from word processing programs, to websites that explore words and language for children, to special programs designed to teach children to read at home.

E-mail and instant messaging have become so omnipresent that parents and children can keep a running written dialogue from nearly anywhere on earth. Children can also be encouraged to use these communication technologies to correspond with others—siblings, relatives, and friends.

Most televisions have the capability of providing written captions on the screen. With captioned television children have the opportunity to see the written form of words as they are spoken. We know some parents who claim that their children learned to read from following the captions on the family TV—that by making the match from voice to print they entered into the world of reading.

Many U.S. television programs such as those on the National Geographic, Discovery, and Public Broadcasting Service channels have Internet components online that must be read and that allow children (and parents) to learn even more about the topic presented in a television program.

Making It Happen at Home

We hope we have made you think about how you can help parents help their children learn to read in ways that use the texts we find in our lives every day. We need to cast a wide net when it comes to thinking of materials that may help children learn to read. If you want to pursue these topics with parents, here are a few suggestions to keep in mind.

- Develop an hour-long workshop to share with parents these forms of texts and how they may be able to use them with their children.

- Develop a written guide that parents can refer to when using these alternative materials with their children. Feel free to use information from this column with parents.
- Encourage parents to choose one or two alternative texts and use them regularly with their children. Suggest that parents make a daily routine of sharing the newspaper, reading the mail, developing a list, or performing rhymes or songs with children. That time will become a daily ritual that children (and parents) will come to expect, whether it's right when the child comes home from school, before or after dinner time, or at bedtime. Making it a ritual turns it into a normal part of family life.

Reading is reading, whatever the reading material might be. The more a child reads, the better reader that child will become. Life's circumstances may not enable some families to make regular trips to the bookstore or library. As teachers we need to think outside the box, and we need to encourage parents to do so as well.

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References

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